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# The Oedipus Complex, Antigone, and Electra: The Woman as Hero and Victim

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*This paper reinterprets the structural interpretation of Greek mythology presented by Leach and Lévi-Strauss from a feminist perspective. The reinterpretation approaches the Oedipus myth and Freud's analysis of it from the perspective of Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and a hero of Sophoclean tragedy. Ancient Greek tragedy allowed a few mythic women the role of hero, although women in ancient Greek society were confined to the domestic sphere. The paper discusses Antigone, Electra, and other mythic women in their relations to family and the public domain. The interpretation of Greek mythology differs from previous ones but is not inconsistent with them. [mythology, gender roles, Oedipus complex, myth and social structure, structuralism]*

THIS PAPER ADDS A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE to the structural interpretations of Greek mythology presented by Leach (1970) and Lévi-Strauss (1955). According to Leach, there is a message in Greek mythology and it "is simple enough: if society is to go on, daughters must be disloyal to their parents and sons must destroy [replace] their fathers" (1970:83). Leach elicits this message by carrying forward Lévi-Strauss's analysis (1955) of the Oedipus myth into a structural review of the system of Greek mythology (Leach 1970: 68-86).

However, this message represents only one perspective. The system of relationships suggested by Leach can be transformed by rules that first reduce "parents" to "father" and that then invert generation and cross-sex relationship. Since women in ancient Greece were under the tutelage of father, brother, husband, or grown son (see Harrison 1968:1-44, 108-121), it is consistent with Greek law and social structure to posit a rule reducing "parents" to "father." Inverting generation and cross-sex relationship then transforms the message Leach found into the following one: to maintain domination, men seek to bind their daughters (sisters) and nullify (displace) their sons.

In this paper I try to illustrate that these messages, no less than that suggested by Leach, are to be found in Greek mythology. The argument is introduced by a reexamination of the myths of the house of Thebes, more specifically the myth of Oedipus and his relation to his daughter Antigone and to his sons. Thus, the paper extends from two generations to three Freud's famous theory of the Oedipus complex, which Lévi-Strauss accepts (1955:16) as a version of the myth. This extension is consistent not only with Sophocles' tragedies but also with psychoanalytic theory (see Jones 1938:323).

The message "to maintain domination men seek to bind their daughters [sisters] and nullify [displace] their sons," when applied to the Oedipus myth, leads to another state-

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ment of relationships: the Oedipus myth is to the Oedipus complex as the myth of Antigone is to metaphoric father-daughter (brother-sister) incest and the victimization of women. The myth of Antigone can be viewed as a representation of metaphoric father-daughter incest and, thereby, the binding of women to a stance of self-abnegation toward men.

In recounting the myths of Oedipus and Antigone, I include their representation not only by the ancient Greeks but also by Freud and by Lévi-Strauss and the theories these men offered in connection with the myths. Thus, structural and psychoanalytic thought underlie the reinterpretation of Greek mythology presented here. The reinterpretation draws on literary theory as well, on the role of the hero in Greek mythology and tragedy. Antigone, although female, is a hero. This role was allowed a few women in Greek tragedy, but none in Greek society where women were confined to the domestic sphere (Lacey 1968; Pomeroy 1975).

Electra, as portrayed by Sophocles, also is a hero; and the argument of the paper is further elaborated through analysis of the myths of Electra and her mother, Clytemnestra. The discussion of these myths takes note of Jung's representation of Electra, takes issue with it, and refers to mother-daughter relations as portrayed in psychoanalytic theory from a feminist perspective. I also discuss gender roles and relations in Greek society from Homer through the classic age. Some classical and Mediterranean scholars have suggested theories of family roles and relations that sweep through the ages. This sweep is not irrelevant to the sweep of psychoanalytic theory.

The paper also reviews a larger body of Greek mythology and the gender roles it portrays. Although the analysis is in accord with the structural approach of Lévi-Strauss and Leach, it elicits a different set of messages.

#### OEDIPUS, THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX, AND ANTIGONE

The myth of Antigone is part of the Theban saga, one of the great heroic cycles of Greek mythology (see Rose 1950:182-196). Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, tyrant and king of Thebes, one of two daughters Jocasta bore him. The story of her heroic life and death, as presented by Sophocles, is interlaced with that of her father and her two brothers. But where does the myth of Oedipus begin? How many generations does it include?

Greek sagas and Greek tragedies deal with family relationships, as scholars repeatedly have noted (e.g., Kirk 1970:39; Vickers 1973:100ff.). According to Aristotle, ". . . in these days the finest tragedies are always on the story of some few houses . . . that may have been involved, as either agents or sufferers, in some deed of horror" (McKeon 1941:1467). The misdeeds of an individual could be visited on his descendants for five generations, according to Greek belief (Adkins 1972:43-44). The fate of a mythic hero was part of the fate of a "house."

Freud and Lévi-Strauss present the myth of Oedipus from very different starting points and include a different span of generations. This is not accidental, given their theories. For Freud, it was sufficient to place Oedipus with reference to his parents. In contrast, Lévi-Strauss begins his representation with Cadmos, Oedipus' paternal great-great-grandfather, in search of his sister whom Zeus had borne away. Each representation is quoted below to the extent that seems necessary to make clear the fit between representation and the theory it serves.

#### *The Oedipus Myth and the Oedipus Complex: Freud's Theory*

While Freud was convinced that girls as well as boys experience the Oedipus complex, his famous theory focuses on the developing male, on a young boy's sexual wishes for his

mother and parricidal impulses toward his father. Sophocles created three tragedies about Oedipus and the house of Thebes, but Freud refers only to *Oedipus the King*. *Oedipus at Colonus*, which portrays the old man's loving relation to his daughters and mortal curse on his sons, is ignored, as is *Antigone*. In recounting the myth, Freud also underlines Oedipus' parricide, while merely noting his parents' attempted filicide. Freud writes:

Oedipus, the son of Laius, king of Thebes, and Jocasta, is exposed as a suckling, because an oracle had informed the father that his son, who was still unborn, would be his murderer. He is rescued, and grows up as a king's son at a foreign court, until, being uncertain of his origin, he, too, consults the oracle, and is warned to avoid his native place, for he is destined to become the murderer of his father and the husband of his mother. On the road leading away from his supposed home he meets King Laius, and in a sudden quarrel strikes him dead. He comes to Thebes, where he solves the riddle of the Sphinx, who is barring the way to the city, whereupon he is elected king by the grateful Thebans, and is rewarded with the hand of Jocasta. He reigns for many years in peace and honour, and begets two sons and two daughters upon his unknown mother, until at last a plague breaks out—which causes the Thebans to consult the oracle anew. Here Sophocles' tragedy begins. The messengers bring the reply that the plague will stop as soon as the murderer of Laius is driven from the country. But where is he? . . .

The action of the play consists simply in the disclosure, approached step by step and artistically delayed (and comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis) that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, and that he is the son of the murdered man and Jocasta. Shocked by the abominable crime he was unwittingly committed, Oedipus blinds himself, and departs from his native city. The prophecy of the oracle has been fulfilled. [1938a:307]

Freud then presents his theory of the Oedipus complex:

If the *Oedipus Rex* is capable of moving a modern reader or playgoer no less powerfully than it moved the contemporary Greeks, the only possible explanation is that the effect of the Greek tragedy does not depend upon the conflict between fate and the human will, but upon the peculiar nature of the material by which this conflict is revealed. There must be a voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the power of fate in the *Oedipus*. . . . And there actually is a motive in the story of King Oedipus which explains the verdict of this inner voice. His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is nothing more or less than a wish-fulfillment—the fulfillment of the wish of our childhood. [1938a:307–308]

Freud also quotes (1938a:309) the text of the play where

there is an unmistakable reference to the fact that the Oedipus legend has its source in dream material of immemorial antiquity. . . . Jocasta comforts Oedipus—who is not yet enlightened . . . by an allusion to a dream which is often dreamed, though it cannot, in her opinion, mean anything:—

For many a man hath seen himself in dreams  
His mother's mate, but he who gives no heed  
To such like matters bears the easier life. [981–983]

However, Sophocles' play draws to a close focusing not on children as protagonists in relation to parents but on parents as protagonists in relation to children. The self-blinded Oedipus refers to the fate Laius and Jocasta intended for him when he implores Creon, Jocasta's brother, for exile

in the mountains where Cithaeron is, that's called  
my mountain which my mother and father  
while they were living would have made my tomb.  
So I may die by their decree who sought  
indeed to kill me. [1452–1455]

In his plea Oedipus also dismisses the future of his sons while begging to touch his daughters:

Creon, you need not care  
about my sons; they're men and so wherever  
they are, they will not lack a livelihood.  
But my two girls—so sad and pitiful—  
whose table never stood apart from mine,  
and everything I touched they always shared—  
O Creon, have a thought for them! And most  
I wish that you might suffer me to touch them  
and sorrow with them. [1460-1468]

If a theme of Sophocles' play is family relations, the tragedian did not only present paricide and son-mother incest. He also told of father-son filicide and the yearning of a man for his daughters.

### *The Oedipus Myth and Antigone as Hero*

The heroic character of Antigone and her self-abnegating devotion to her father and brothers appear in *Oedipus at Colonus* and in *Antigone*. She accompanied and cared for old Oedipus after his expulsion from Thebes. *Oedipus at Colonus* begins with their arrival at the grove of the Eumenides (Furies) in Attica near Athens. Now he has reached the resting place where, according to the oracle, he may die.

But the polluted, blind old man is to become divine in death, "equated to the gods" (Knox 1955:27). His burial ground, according to oracles, will confer a great victory on the city in whose land his body will lie. He wills that it be Athens. However, his sons are about to wage war for the throne of Thebes. Creon comes to take Oedipus back, by force if necessary, to the outskirts of the city from which he is still in exile. Polyneices, the older of the two sons, banished by his brother Eteocles, and about to attack Thebes, also seeks out his father and begs him to return. Old Oedipus curses Creon to a fate like his; he disowns Polyneices and curses him too.

. . . you shall die  
By your own brother's hand, and you shall kill  
The brother who banished you. For this I pray. [1387-1389]

Summoned by the gods, blind Oedipus walks without guidance to the ground into which his body disappears.

Although Ismene remained in Thebes while Antigone accompanied their father, Ismene joins them in Attica. It is in *Antigone* that the full contrast between the sisters is made. The curse of Oedipus has been fulfilled. Both brothers are dead and Creon is ruler of Thebes. He refuses burial to Polyneices. Disobedience to this edict will mean death. Antigone is determined to defy Creon. Declining to join her, Ismene presents the submissive attitude proper to a Greek woman.

We'll perish terribly if we force law  
and try to cross the royal vote and power.  
We must remember that we two are women  
so not to fight with men.  
And that since we are subject to strong power  
we must hear these orders, or any that may be worse. [59-64]

But Antigone remains obdurate in her decision. She answers (in Knox's translation): "Be what you decide, but I shall bury him. If the action brings my death, it is a noble death" (Knox 1964:10). In scattering dust on her brother's corpse to ensure him entrance to Hades, Antigone carries out a sacred family obligation, "the gods' unwritten

and unfailing laws" (1.455), as well as an act of love. But it also is a political act for which she dies.

Antigone meets death as a hero, not a victim. The hero of tragedy, according to Aristotle, passes from happiness to misery (McKeon 1941:1467). However, it is not the change in fortunes that distinguishes a hero. A victim also suffers, but his suffering is not the outcome of his own acts or choice. A victim suffers rather than acts, according to Knox (1964:5). In contrast, "on the tragic hero, suffering is never merely imposed; he incurs it by his own decision" (Brooks 1955:4). If Oedipus epitomizes the tragic hero, as Knox suggests, Antigone also shares the heroic qualities of her father.

The myth of Antigone can be seen as both an inversion and a completion of that of Oedipus, as presented by Sophocles. However, Antigone does not appear in the Homeric version of the Oedipus myth or in other early sources. According to Bowra (1944:64):

The legend seems less likely to come from books than from local tradition. We may assume that in all its versions Antigone tried to bury her brother in defiance of authority, but beyond this little is known.

The Homeric version of the Oedipus myth differs from that of Sophocles in more than the absence of Antigone. For while Jocasta (Epikaste) committed suicide, according to Homer, Oedipus did not blind himself, did not go into exile, and did not cease ruling Thebes.

A comparison of the Oedipus myth of Homer and that of Sophocles suggests that the figure of Antigone came into being to serve the Oedipus who needed a staff. She is the staff and Sophocles makes her heroic, a complement to his heroic Oedipus.

However, Antigone, as staff, also is the third leg of the Sphinx's riddle. Oedipus, the "swollen foot," begat her on his mother and she supports him after both are bereft of their mother. She survives him to bury her brother.

But the woman who is hero is not allowed also to be wife and mother. Lamenting her lost marriage chamber, Antigone goes to the tomb.

### *The Oedipus Complex and Antigone as Victim*

Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* sufficed Freud for the meaning he attributed to the Oedipus myth, since Freud's first representation of the Oedipus complex involved only two generations, the child and his parents. However, Freud and his followers concluded that each generation transfers its psychic dispositions to the next (see Freud 1939b:929). Jones wrote:

. . . a man who displays an abnormally strong affection for his daughter also gives evidence of a strong . . . fixation in regard to his mother. . . . In his phantasy, he begets his mother . . . he becomes thus her father, and so arrives at a later identification of his real daughter with his mother. [1938:523]

If Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex is credible, it follows that all three of Sophocles' Theban plays, with their three generations, carry messages about family relationships. Oedipus, who was exposed by his parents and who married his mother, also had sons whom he disowned and daughters he bound to him. These children, as well as Oedipus himself, personify the messages of Greek mythology suggested in this paper: "to maintain domination men seek to bind their daughters (sisters) and (parents) nullify (displace) their sons"; and "the Oedipus myth is to the Oedipus complex as the myth of Antigone is to metaphoric father-daughter (brother-sister) incest and the victimization of women."

The term "metaphoric incest" is used here to denote a relationship in which personal boundaries between family members become blurred through overidentification and other processes; and a dominant member binds the emotions of a subordinate member to serve the dominant member's needs. Such relationships have been discussed in the clinical literature of psychoanalysis. Rado (1956:197) refers to the "powerful . . . undercurrents in the parents' own attitudes toward their children," and other clinicians have built on this (e.g., Glueck 1963; see also Devereux 1953). Such relationships have been considered analogous to incest in their emotional quality and consequences (e.g., Orgel 1934; Lidz, Fleck, and Cornelison 1965; Shengold 1967).

It may be asked how modern clinical theory gives credence to messages from the mythology of ancient Greece. If this question is asked, it must be asked about the Oedipus complex as well. The traffic between psychoanalytic theory and Greek mythology has gone on for more than 80 years. By now, classical scholars encourage a psychoanalyst-anthropologist who interprets the dreams Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides created for their characters (Devereux 1976:ix-xxi).

It is consistent with psychoanalytic theory that Antigone, despite being a hero and because of it, also is a victim as regards her life as woman. For she dedicated to her father and brother the life that otherwise would have been available for marriage and motherhood. This is explicit in both of Sophocles' plays in which she is a major character. Indeed, in *Antigone*, she is engaged to Haemon, Creon's son. But in heroically defying Creon, she transgresses her gender role as well as his edict, and he condemns her for the one as well as the other.

I am no man and she the man instead  
if she can have this conquest without pain. [484-485]  
No woman rules me while I live. [526]

The clinical literature on incest repeatedly chronicles three generations of disturbed family relations (e.g., Kaufman, Peck, and Taguiri 1954; Cormier, Kennedy, and Sangowicz 1962; Weiner 1962; Rapheling, Carpenter, and Davis 1967. The occurrence of incest has been seen as an expression rather than as a cause of such disturbance.

The myth of Oedipus, as presented by Sophocles, also recounts three generations of disturbed family relations. Oedipus kills his father who sought to kill him. Jocasta, incestuous wife and mother who also had exposed her infant son, dies by her own hand. Her sons by Oedipus kill each other. Her daughter, heroic virgin Antigone, also dies by her own hand in the tomb. Creon, Jocasta's brother, immures Jocasta's daughter. His son Haemon dies by his own hand when the body of Antigone is discovered. Haemon's suicide leads to that of his mother.

Two generations of the house of Thebes were sufficient for Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, although his theory implies three generations or more. Three generations were portrayed by Sophocles. Lévi-Strauss's version of the Oedipus myth goes back to the events leading to the founding of Thebes.

### *The Theban Saga and Structural Analysis: Lévi-Strauss's Theory*

Lévi-Strauss's well-known representation of the Oedipus myth consists of 11 selections of episodes or other elements from the Theban saga. These "gross constituent units" (Lévi-Strauss 1955:86) or "mythemes" are arranged in four columns. This arrangement illustrates Lévi-Strauss's thesis "that the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations*, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning" (ibid. 89-90). The units of the Oedipus myth are represented as follows (ibid.):

Kadmos seeks  
his sister Europa,  
ravished by Zeus

Kadmos kills  
the dragon

The Spartoi  
kill each other

Labdacos  
(Laios' father)  
= *lame* (?)

Oedipus kills  
his father Laios

(Laios [Oedipus'  
father] = *left-*  
*sided* (?)

Oedipus kills  
the Sphynx

Oedipus  
marries his  
mother  
Jocasta

Eteocles kills  
his brother  
Polynices

Oedipus =  
*swollen-foot*  
(?)

Antigone  
buries her  
brother  
Polynices  
despite  
prohibition

The top of three units or "mythemes" of this representation concern Cadmos and the founding of Thebes. The dragon Cadmos killed guarded a spring from which he needed water for a sacrifice to Athena. The sacrifice was the cow who had guided him to the site. On Athena's advice, Cadmos sowed the dragon's teeth. Armed warriors sprang from them. Cadmos stoned the warriors and they battled one another until only five remained alive. These Spartoi, or Sown Men, were the ancestors of the nobility of Thebes (see Rose 1950:184-185).

While the first three mythemes of Lévi-Strauss's representation focus on episodes with which the Theban saga begins, seven of the others deal with Oedipus, his parents, or his children. Only the reference to Labdacus links Cadmos to Laius and his death at the hand of Oedipus. Lévi-Strauss's exclusion of many of the episodes in between has been criticized by Vickers (1973:193) and by Carroll (1978). Carroll extends his criticism to an attack on Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of the myth and to a reanalysis, discussed below, of the meaning of the Theban saga.

However, Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of the Oedipus myth depends not only on the mythemes but on the relations between them exhibited in his representation (which Carroll does not reproduce). According to Lévi-Strauss's interpretation, the Oedipus myth

has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous . . . to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. [1955:91-92]

He sees as the common feature of the first column

*the overrating of blood relations.* It is obvious that the second column expresses the same thing, but inverted: *underrating of blood relations.* The third column refers to monsters being slain. . . . Since the monsters are overcome by men, we may thus say that the common feature of the third column is the denial of the *autochthonous origin of man.*

The fourth column refers

to difficulties to walk and behave straight . . . a universal character of men born from the earth . . . that at the moment they emerge from the depth, they either cannot walk or do it clum-



sily . . . the common feature of the fourth column is: *the persistence of the autochthonous origin of man*. It follows that column four is to column three as column one is to column two. The inability to connect two kinds of relationships is overcome (or rather replaced) by the positive statement that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in the same way.

He concludes

the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which . . . replaces the original problem: born from one or born from two? born from different or born from same? By a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life verifies cosmology by its statement of structure. [1955:92]

Having presented his representation as an analogue to a musical score, Lévi-Strauss concludes his interpretation with mathematical metaphors. His use of mathematics as a metaphor of the operations of structural analysis goes back to his theories about kinship and social structure (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 1953). It continues in the *Mythologiques*, where its metaphoric character is admitted (1969:30). This stress on relations abstracted through mathematical metaphor is not observed by Carroll in his reanalysis of the Theban saga.

#### *The Theban Saga and Structural Analysis: An Additional Message*

It is possible to reinterpret Lévi-Strauss's own representation by his own methods, since the representation makes a statement about family relations that Lévi-Strauss apparently did not see or chose not to make explicit. A common feature that can be elicited from his first column is: men and women within the nuclear family have loving relations. This feature also is evident in the myth of Cadmos, since Cadmos is accompanied by his mother in search of his sister until the mother dies (see Rose 1950:184). A common feature that can be elicited from the second column contrasts with that of the first: men within the nuclear family have murderous relations with one another. In the third column a man who lost loving relations within the nuclear family kills a male monster, whereas a man who fled such relations kills a female monster. The fourth column has as a common feature: men by themselves, bereft of relations, who are also crippled. The third column combines and condenses the messages of the first two columns: incestuous love breeds homicide and monsters. The fourth column presents an alternative: renunciation of love and being crippled.

It is evident that Lévi-Strauss's representation of the Oedipus myth can be viewed as a statement of the Oedipus complex. This is not surprising, since Lévi-Strauss considered Freud's version compatible with his. "Our interpretation may take into account, and certainly is applicable to, the Freudian use of the Oedipus myth" writes Lévi-Strauss (1955:92-93). "Therefore, not only Sophocles, but Freud himself, should be included among the recorded versions of the Oedipus myth" (*ibid.*).

If Lévi-Strauss's representation of the Oedipus myth is interpreted as a statement of the Oedipus complex, it includes Antigone and, thereby, also expresses the first message suggested in this paper: "to maintain domination, men seek to bind their daughters (sisters) and nullify (displace) their sons." Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss's representation strengthens the second message: "the Oedipus myth is to the Oedipus complex as the myth of Antigone is to metaphorical father-daughter (brother-sister) incest and the victimization of women." For the topmost mytheme of the representation (see column 1) refers to the rape of a woman and to her brother seeking after her; the bottom mytheme (see column 1) refers to a woman's self-sacrificing devotion to a brother.

## ELECTRA AND CLYTEMNESTRA

Antigone is not the only representative of the woman as hero in Sophoclean tragedy (see Knox 1964). Electra is the other. Her name has been translated as "the unmarried" (Lattimore 1959:27) or "without wedlock" (Vernant 1969:142).<sup>1</sup> As she appears in works by Aeschylus and Euripides, as well as by Sophocles, she is the grieving mature virgin daughter of Agamemnon, leader of the Greek expedition against Troy. On his return from Troy, Agamemnon was murdered by Clytemnestra, his wife, and by Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover and Agamemnon's paternal cousin and mortal enemy. Years later, Orestes, Agamemnon's son, helped by Electra, revenges their father by slaying Aegisthus. Urged on by Electra, he also slays Clytemnestra. Different versions of the myth of the murders vary in their casts of characters.

This section of the paper discusses several versions of the myth of the two-generation family in which Electra is an unmarried daughter and sister. One version, that of Homer, refers to the slayings of both Agamemnon and Aegisthus, but does not mention either Electra or the matricide. A different selection of characters was made by Jung who, like Freud, turned to Greek mythology for paradigmatic figures of personality development and then went far beyond Freud in bringing myth into his theories. Rejecting Freud's theory of the universality of the Oedipus complex, Jung (1961:154) took Electra as the symbol of a girl in her relations to father and mother. Jung does not include Orestes or Aegisthus in the version of the myth he fashions.

If a myth consists of all its versions, as Lévi-Strauss suggests (1955), it follows that contrasting casts of characters as well as contrasting incidents state relationships that have a message. The myth of Electra, as this section will demonstrate, communicates the same messages as the myth of Antigone. In addition, it reiterates male dominance and restriction of women to the domestic sphere.

### *Gender Roles and the Homeric Order*

To begin with Homer, his expurgations from an extant body of myth may have been deliberate (see Murray 1960). Homer not only leaves out Electra and the matricide from his references to the murder of Agamemnon and Orestes' vengeance; Homer also does not mention Iphigenia, another daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, whom Agamemnon sacrificed in order to raise a wind to carry the Greek fleet to Troy.

If Homer's art deliberately idealized a past age (Murray 1960:120ff.), his omission of the myth of Iphigenia is consistent with more than the exclusion of human sacrifice from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It also is consistent with his view of women as properly subordinate and submissive to men. Later versions of the murder of Agamemnon, such as those of Pindar as well as Aeschylus, recognize that Clytemnestra may have moved against her husband at least partly in retribution for his sacrifice of their daughter (see Lattimore 1959:12). In Homer's version, however, Clytemnestra is presented as a woman who plotted the death of her husband because she had taken a lover. Homer's Clytemnestra does not reverse roles so far as to kill her husband herself. It was Aegisthus who slew Agamemnon. Homer has Clytemnestra slay another woman, Cassandra, prophetess and former princess of Troy, whom Agamemnon brought home as spoil.

It is in the Homeric order of things that Cassandra was taken home as a slave by Agamemnon who sacked her city. Therefore, Homer presents Cassandra as Clytemnestra's pitiful victim, not as her rival or as Agamemnon's victim (*Odyssey* XI:420-430). It is also in the Homeric order that a man, not a woman, takes blood revenge; and he takes it on another man. In the household of a king, vengeance is a dynastic act. Aegisthus took vengeance on Agamemnon and succeeded him as king. After

Orestes slays Aegisthus, he orders a grave mound for Clytemnestra as well as Aegisthus (*Odyssey* III:306-311); but Homer does not tell of the matricide.

The Clytemnestra of Homer is an utterly wicked woman, a shameless, monstrous wife (see *Odyssey* XI:420-435). The Clytemnestra of Aeschylus has taken over the male role (see Winnington-Ingram 1948) and, in the *Agamemnon*, is superb. She is queen and, in the absence of her husband, she exercises political power. But this is a violation of the legitimate order not only in the world of Homer but, even more so, in the world of classical Athens (Lacey 1968).

Although in the Homeric world women were seen as "naturally inferior . . . limited . . . to the production of offspring and . . . household duties" (Finley 1954:138), nonetheless, the household was the basic unit of Homeric society. The aristocratic woman of the *oikos*, "the large noble household with its staff of slaves and commoners, its aristocratic retainers, and its allies among relatives and guest-friends" (ibid.: 111) was not secluded in her quarters and she had a managerial role. In contrast, the world of classical Athens was preeminently the world of the *polis*, the world of the city-state, with its councils, assemblies, and courts of Law (see Andrews 1967), its public life from which women were totally excluded (e.g., Pomeroy 1975:58-88).

### *Gender Roles in the Oresteia*

The Clytemnestra of Aeschylus, in her magnificence and potency, is even more monstrous a woman, according to classic Greek values, than the Clytemnestra of Homer. Her foil is Cassandra, the captive of Agamemnon, who accepts him as "the beloved" (1103), as "my lord too" (1226). The prophetess characterizes Clytemnestra as follows:

. . . this is daring when the female shall strike down  
the male. What can I call her and be right: What beast  
of loathing: Viper double-fanged, or Scylla witch  
holed in the rocks and bane of men that range the sea;  
smoldering mother of death to smoke relentless hate  
on those most dear. [1232-1236]

Cassandra also calls Clytemnestra

. . . the woman-lioness, who goes to bed  
with the wolf, when her proud lion ranges far away,  
and she will cut me down; [1258-1260]  
. . . as she makes sharp the blade  
against her man, death that he brought a mistress home. [1262-1263]

Aeschylus recalls early in the *Agamemnon* (and the *Oresteia*) the full list of Clytemnestra's grievances against Agamemnon. The chorus and Cassandra also refer repeatedly to the curse of the house of Atreus—the sequence of wrongs done, blood shed, and retributions—which have made Aegisthus Agamemnon's mortal foe. But despite her claims, these do not justify Clytemnestra's murder of her husband and appropriation of the male role. Instead, in the *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*, Aeschylus justifies Orestes' murder of his mother.

The justification is not yet completely clear in the *Libation Bearers*. Orestes strikes down Aegisthus. Charged by Apollo, he moves against his mother but falters. His friend Pylades, who otherwise does not speak, urges him on in the name of Apollo. Aeschylus was not the first to give the figure of Orestes another young male as partner in his vengeance. Pylades was also mentioned by Hesiod who does not, however, make explicit the matricide. Aeschylus has the two armed young men take Clytemnestra to her death.

But when Orestes claims he acted in just retribution, doubts attack him. Then the Erinyes, the Furies, appear and drive him away from his realm.

Aeschylus' Electra appears only in the first part of the play. She does not make decisions. Sent to her father's tomb by her mother to pour libations, she does not know what to do. The chorus has to advise her. They have to remind her to include Orestes in her prayer. She states grievances: her mother sold her and Orestes to buy Aegisthus; she is equivalent to a slave in her father's house. Orestes joins her and they invoke Agamemnon. They pray together for success in avenging him and reclaiming their due. But Electra had prayed to "be more temperate of heart than my mother" (139-140). She does not help plan the murders; she plays no role in carrying them out.

In the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus has Athena, a virgin, martial goddess, born of Zeus alone, give final legitimacy to male domination. Athena votes against the timeless right of the Erinyes, the ancient goddesses beneath the ground, to pursue and wreak vengeance on the murderer of a mother. The murder of a husband, the Erinyes say, is not the shedding of kindred blood (213). In contrast, Apollo, who charged Orestes to kill his mother, argues the Greek view of procreation:

The mother is no parent of that which is called  
her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed  
that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she  
preserves a stranger's seed. (658-661)

Athena gives final judgment emphasizing the marital bond and male supremacy:

There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth  
and, but for marriage, I am always for the male  
with all my heart, and strongly on my father's side.  
So, in a case where the wife has killed her husband, lord  
of the house, her death shall not mean most to me. (736-740)

The female Erinyes would avenge the murdered mother. Spear-bearing virgin Athena, born from her father's head, repudiates the right to revenge of the wife and mother who also took a weapon in hand. Aeschylus' Clytemnestra is superb. But she cannot be a hero, although she acts as a male hero may. The wife and mother wielding an ax is a monster whose only avengers are the Erinyes, female monsters. These are overruled by a virgin goddess who never had a mother.

### *Electra as Hero*

In contrast to Clytemnestra, Sophocles' virgin Electra is a hero in her own right. Her heroic "resolve to act, that rock against which the waves of threat and persecution will break in vain" (Knox 1964:10), is expressed in sustained public mourning for her father and in calls for him to be revenged. She has genuine grievances: she is unmarried lest she bear a son who could avenge her father. She sees herself as already past childbearing. She is abused, hungry, and in rags. Her mother hates and fears her. Aegisthus will not let her step outside the house. Like Antigone, she has a sister, Chrysothemis. Like Ismene, Chrysothemis yields to authority. She too remains unmarried, but she lives in comfort because she does not mourn.

Sophocles' Orestes comes accompanied by an old servant, Pedagogus, as well as by his friend, Pylades. When she believed that her brother was dead, Electra had considered slaying Aegisthus. She asked her sister to help and was told to be sensible. But when her brother reveals himself, it is Pedagogus as well as Pylades, not Electra, who abets the vengeance. Electra can be a hero without stepping outside the woman's role. Had she herself actually taken blood revenge, she might have been disqualified as a hero.

Although Jung took Electra as the female equivalent of Oedipus, as the symbol of a daughter's feelings toward her parents, it should be evident that Sophocles' Electra is equivalent to Antigone, despite a few inversions, rather than an equivalent or inversion of Oedipus. Electra does not commit incest with her father; she is bereft of him while he is away at war and by his violent death on his return. Antigone, in Sophocles' tragedies, is bereft of her mother who died by self-inflicted violence. Antigone buries her brother, who was mortally cursed by their father. Electra spurs her brother to slay their mother. In both cases the relation of the girl to father and brother is loving. In both cases the girl lacks the love of her mother. Jocasta is dead; Clytemnestra in Sophocles' *Electra* abuses her daughter. Jocasta, the mother who let her son be exposed, kills herself on discovering she married the son. Clytemnestra, the mother who killed her husband, is killed by the son. Antigone dies unmarried and childless, and she bewails this fate. Electra must remain unmarried and childless as long as her mother and Aegisthus live; and she bewails this state as well as her dead father.

There is the same message in both representations of the woman as hero: a girl deprived of the love of mother can become bound to father (and brother) and remain unmarried and childless. Such metaphoric father-daughter incest victimizes a woman by appropriating and dedicating to the father (brother) the life space that otherwise would be available for marriage and children. Furthermore, the woman as hero cannot also be wife and mother. In Sophocles' plays, Antigone and Electra are heroic and deprived.

### *Clytemnestra as Victim*

Euripides' *Electra*, which may have been earlier than Sophocles' (Vickers 1973:553), has Electra married to a poor farmer to forestall the possibility of noble sons to avenge her father. However, the farmer has left Agamemnon's daughter virgin. She mourns her father, her poverty, and her wasted life. After discovering Orestes, she says she can bring Clytemnestra to her by claiming to have given birth to a son. The Clytemnestra who comes is gentle and motherly. Having killed Aegisthus, Orestes aided by Pylades unwillingly slays his mother. Electra, who drove him on to it, then also joins him in grief. The Dioscuri—Castor and Pollux, Clytemnestra's divine brothers—arrive. The two divine young men purify Orestes and Electra and ordain Electra's marriage to Pylades, the young man who helped her brother slay their mother. The Dioscuri blame the matricide on Apollo.

Electra, like Antigone, is not an important figure in Greek mythology until she appears as a character in the tragedies.<sup>2</sup> Euripides' version of the Electra myth, in conjunction with the others, suggests that Electra came into existence to make possible Orestes' matricide. If Orestes was to avenge his father on his mother as well as on Aegisthus, a loving sister was necessary to urge him on and to survive their mother. Indeed, suggests Vernant (1969:142), Electra is equivalent to Orestes' mother, supplanting Clytemnestra. Pylades, as well as Sophocles' Pedagogus and the analogous Old Man in Euripides' *Electra*, is a male supporting a male in revenge for a male. But matricide is at least as frightful and polluting as incest. Antigone is blind Oedipus' staff; virgin Electra is her brother's goad.

### *The Electra Myth and Jung*

There is no brother in Jung's version of the Electra myth. Claiming that jealousy is an earlier feature than sexuality, Jung adds that "with budding eroticism," a son develops the Oedipus complex, whereas a daughter develops an Electra complex. "As everyone knows, Electra took vengeance on her mother Clytemnestra for murdering her husband

Agamemnon and thus robbing her—Electra—of their beloved father” (Jung 1961:154).

Although feminist critiques of psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Mitchell 1975; Chodorow 1978) give little attention to Jung, his theory about female psychic development implies an end to both mothering and society. If Electra, as represented by Jung, had killed her mother herself, she thereby would have been left outcast, polluted, and entirely alone. Greek mythology and the messages it communicates do not seem to permit such a girl to come into existence or to survive. Aeschylus’ Electra obeyed her mother. Sophocles’ Electra hated her mother not only because of the loss of their father but also, and perhaps especially, because her mother abused and deprived her, Electra, of her womanly due. Euripides’ Electra was prepared to kill herself if Orestes failed in his attack on Aegisthus and then she mourned her murdered mother.

Jung’s version of the Electra myth implicitly destroys the family. In contrast, even the unloved, unforgiving Electra of Sophocles is dedicated to the family and is committed to its maintenance in her love for Orestes. If she neither marries nor can bear children, nonetheless, Orestes “takes the place for her simultaneously of son, father and husband” (Vernant 1969:143).

To paraphrase Freud, the Electras of the Greek tragedies move us insofar as we can recognize them as women. The Electras of Greek tragedy each mourned her father, mourned her deprived state, clung to her brother, and urged him in his vengeance. But she did not murder her mother. Therefore, Jung’s version of the Electra myth gives inadvertent support to feminist critiques of psychoanalytic theory which, nonetheless, still accept Freud’s views about the universality of the Oedipus complex and the importance of the pre-Oedipal mother, the mother of dependent babyhood, to personality development. According to feminist Freudian theory (e.g., Chodorow 1978), the pre-Oedipal mother remains internalized in a growing girl and an attachment between daughter and mother persists.

#### MYTH, MESSAGE, AND SOCIETY

This paper has carried forward its argument through structural analysis of the paradigmatic myths of Oedipus and Antigone, Electra, and Clytemnestra. The term “paradigm” comes from the Greek, where its meaning is “pattern” or demonstration. In *Oedipus the King*, the chorus calls Oedipus a paradigm (1139), “a demonstration . . . that man’s keenest sight is blindness, his highest knowledge ignorance” (Knox 1964:145). Freud also took the figure of Oedipus as a paradigm, a paradigm of childhood development. This paper has focused on mythic women, women in relation to father and brother and to husband and son. Sophocles’ Antigone and Electra are paradigms of the woman as hero and victim. They are heroic in transcending their gender role, yet in transcending it they also are denied fulfillment as women, and Antigone sacrifices her life. Thus, they are victims in their heroism. Although Antigone and Electra transcend the role given to women, they do not actually violate it. In this they are set off from Clytemnestra who reverses gender roles.

The analysis so far has included several versions of each myth. Indeed, it is built on relations exhibited in the differences among the versions; and these myths are only limited segments of two sagas from the corpus of Greek mythology. Where does such an analysis end? Leach, who raises the question (1970:68), avoids “a project on the same scale as *Mythologiques*” (ibid.) by limiting to bare outlines of stories much of his discussion of the Greek myths he chooses. He concludes: “There never comes a point at which we can say that we have considered ‘all the variants,’ for almost any story drawn from the general complex of classical Greek mythology turns out to be a variant in one way or another” (ibid.:82).

While Leach derives a message from the whole set of stories, it should be evident from the analysis this paper has offered that any story in Greek mythology may have more than one set of messages. These sets of messages, like algebraic transformations, are not mutually exclusive. Inverting the message of Greek mythology, Leach found ("if society is to go on, daughters must be disloyal to their parents and sons must destroy [replace] their fathers"), does not expunge it. Instead, the inversion makes the existence of an obverse set of messages explicit and demonstrable.

The power of myth and poetry derives, at least in part, from the multiplicity of messages they carry and can communicate. As Sapir suggested (1934) and Turner has elaborated (1967:29ff.), there is a condensation of meanings in symbols. This condensation of meanings saturates the symbols with emotions that may have deep roots in the unconscious. Family and gender roles, sacred values, ritual symbols, and society are not identical from Homeric Greece to classical Greece to the heterogeneous and changing European and Mediterranean societies of this century, although Campbell (1964:6, 263) has cautiously argued for parallels, if not continuity, between Homeric society and the Sarakatsani shepherds of Epirus whom he studied.

If the great tragedies of classical Greece still move us, as Freud argued, it is because at least some of their symbols and messages still are relevant. If the messages Freud found in the figure of Oedipus are still considered relevant, it follows that there also is relevance in making explicit the messages about women implicit in Greek mythology.

However, not all the messages concern gender and family roles that may approach universality. For example, the goddess Athena is one of the Greek "queens of heaven" who "make a set" (Friedrich 1978:72). The members of this set can be viewed as representing "the distinctively Greek mythic breakup 'of the feminine'" (ibid.). But this breakup is distinctively that of ancient Greece. Aeschylus brings the qualities of the feminine that Athena embodied to the ancient Greeks into the *Oresteia*; her qualities set off and give relative value to other feminine qualities embodied in the tragedies' mortal women and lesser goddesses.

Some of the qualities of the goddess Athena were noted above in relation to the *Oresteia*'s other female characters. However, the meanings Athena had as a symbol to the ancient Greeks are not independent of the system of meanings that includes those of the other "queens of heaven," such as Hestia (Vernant 1969). In contrast, the myth of Oedipus has been seen as paradigmatic across time and space by Fortes (1959) looking at religion and by Knox (1957) as well as by Freud.

### *The Oedipus Complex and Other "Nuclear Complexes"*

Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth was presented as a universal of personality development. In taking issue with Freud, Malinowski suggested that Freud's Oedipus complex corresponded to the European family and that "the nuclear complex of the family . . . must vary with the constitution of the family" (1927:4). Although the issues of nurturance and authority in matrilineal societies as well as of sex and repression continue to be discussed to the present (e.g., Proskauer 1980), Anne Parsons's application (1969) of Malinowski's ideas to southern Italian society and the Mediterranean world has more relevance here.

Drawing on her fieldwork in Naples, Parsons discusses data similar to those that pervade studies of the European Mediterranean: the Madonna of boundless love and forgiveness; the daughter whose virginity is part of the honor of her father and brothers; the great significance of the mother in the family and lesser importance of the father; the importance to males of association with other males outside the family. Parsons concludes that there is a third nuclear family complex in addition to the Oedipus complex

identified by Freud and the matrilineal variant distinguished by Malinowski. This third patterning of family affects is characterized by a man's continuing emotional dependence on his mother, by a continuing antagonism between father and sons, and by a relationship between father (and also brothers) and daughter, in which incestuous impulses are less repressed, and closer to the surface than where there is an Oedipus complex. Parsons briefly discusses Mediterranean honor (see, e.g., Peristiany 1965) in this context.

The concept of "nuclear complex" is compatible with the perspective of this paper. Indeed, the southern Italian-Mediterranean nuclear complex distinguished by Parsons corresponds in no small measure to the messages of Greek mythology elicited here. Parsons's discussion of the great importance of the southern Italian mother in the family and the lesser importance to the domestic sphere of the husband and father brings to mind the household of ancient Greece, the domestic sphere managed by the secluded wife while the man is active outside (see Vernant 1969).

The messages of Greek mythology presented so far have focused more on women as daughters and on women in their families of origin than on women as wives and mothers. This focus is consistent with the fate of the paradigmatic figures of the woman as hero, Sophocles' Antigone and Electra, who were not able to become wives. Indeed, it is one of the messages of Greek mythology elicited in this paper that the woman who is a hero cannot be a wife or mother. This message is also communicated in myths in which wives figure.

### *Wives in Greek Mythology: Virtue, Victimization, Role Reversal*

The myths about wives make it clear that the virtuous wife of Greek mythology submits to the male under whose tutelage she lives. Limited to the domestic sphere, she has no choice unless she is to act. But action may mean invading the public and political domain (e.g., Shaw 1975) which is a role reversal. The women who do not act, the virtuous wives of Greek mythology, nonetheless may become victims. Female circumspection and virtue are no defense against change in fortunes, suffering, or even death. However, the women who choose and act cannot live out their lives as wives and mothers. If they are already wives and mothers, they cannot act as heroes and still stay alive.

Action also can entail role reversal without heroism and even without intended role reversal. Greek mythology metes out fate to women with a discriminating hand where role reversals occur. The great cycles of Greek mythology all present wives who, considered together, may be taken as a paradigmatic set.

Penelope is the paradigmatic circumspect wife whom Homer contrasts with Clytemnestra. Left young and with an infant at her breast (*Odyssey* II:445-450), she awaits Odysseus in his household for 20 years. During the last three of these years she is besieged by suitors whom she holds off by a stratagem that keeps her at her loom (*Odyssey* II:86-110, XIX:136-155). When circumspect Penelope descends from her high chamber, she is accompanied by handmaidens; when in the presence of the suitors, she holds a veil in front of her face (*Odyssey* I:330-335). She guards the precious household stores (*Odyssey* XXI:5-55). She tests her husband before she accepts him (*Odyssey* XXX:105-230). His love and confidence are her reward.

More tragic is the plight of Tecmessa in Sophocles' *Ajax*. A war captive who has borne Ajax a son, she begs the shamed hero not to kill himself leaving her and their son to be dragged off as slaves. Ajax bids her submit. She grieves over his corpse. Virtuous Tecmessa, like Cassandra, submits and is a victim.

The saga of the great hero Heracles includes two virtuous wives whose fates contrast not only with each other but also with the fate of the hero. In Euripides' *Heracles*, the hero, made mad by the goddess Hera, slays his wife Megara and their sons. He also at-



tempts to kill his father, from which he is stopped by the goddess Athena. Although polluted and exiled, he is purified by the hero Theseus, who gives him a home in Athens.

These relations are inverted in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. Here Deianira, another wife of Heracles, accidentally causes his death. Heracles had sent home Iole, a beautiful girl for whom he sacked a city. To win him back, Deianira sends him a robe dipped in a love charm. Unknown to Deianira, the love charm is poison, venom of the Hydra whom Heracles had killed as one of his labors. The poison sends Heracles into a wasting agony. Deianira is told what she did by their son, who curses her. She immediately ends her life by the sword. Before he learns she is dead, Heracles orders their son to bring her to him so that he, the hero, can torture and kill his wife. The dying Heracles then orders his son to burn him on a funeral pyre and marry Iole.

The male hero, Heracles, who unknowingly kills a wife and sons still finds friendship and refuge. A virtuous wife can be the victim of a husband who, nonetheless, still remains a hero. The virtuous wife who unknowingly kills her husband is cursed and must die. The son who cursed his mother replaces his father with the woman who had displaced his mother.

The saga of Heracles also includes another man's virtuous wife, Alcestis. She is the wife of Admetus. She dies so that he may live and Heracles brings her back from the dead. In Euripides' *Alcestis*, the wife who is giving her life for her husband asks that he not take another woman to wife. He promises his lifelong mourning and devotion. But when Heracles brings her back from the dead as a veiled stranger, Admetus accepts the veiled woman. Alcestis, wife and mother, dies for her husband. The woman who is wife and mother can only be a hero if she dies. Brought back veiled and silent, she finds herself accepted and, thereby, betrayed by the husband for whom she died. Alive and betrayed, she is no longer a hero.

Medea is a paradigmatic contrast to the virtuous wives of Greek mythology. She may be taken as a paradigm of the ultimate possibilities and limits of a woman in Greek myth and tragedy: a woman who kills yet, unlike Clytemnestra, does not die. Put aside as a wife, Medea refuses to be a victim. She is not a hero but she takes revenge and, in doing so, reverses gender roles.

Medea appears in the saga of the Argonauts. These heroes, led by Jason, seek the Golden Fleece held by Aetes, king of Colchis. Medea, daughter of Aetes and a sorceress, falls in love with Jason. She helps him gain the fleece and sails away with him. To ward off pursuit, she murders her little brother or, according to another version (Rose 1950:203), has a brother who pursued them ambushed. She also is responsible through trickery for the death of Pelias, Jason's paternal uncle, at the hands of Pelias' own daughters. Medea and Jason then settle in Corinth. Some years later he repudiates her and marries the daughter of the king of Corinth. Medea sends this wife a robe and tiara impregnated with poison. She dies and her father dies trying to save his daughter. Euripides' Medea then kills her own and Jason's sons, although Pausanias has the Corinthians kill the sons. Sent a winged chariot by her grandfather, the sun, Medea escapes to Athens where Aegaeus, Theseus' father, has promised her refuge.

Medea both inverts and parallels Clytemnestra. Her revenge against Jason is polluting and abominable but, unlike Clytemnestra, she did not kill her husband. She killed the new bride and the bride's father. Euripides' Medea also kills the sons she bore Jason, thereby destroying his house. Medea also inverts Deianira. Virtuous Deianira could not survive having inadvertently killed Heracles, whereas treacherous Medea left Jason alive. But Medea, who survived her role reversal, had made herself childless when she ceased to be a wife. She left Corinth, alone.

Medea is not the only woman in Greek myth and tragedy to slay her sons. Two women in the Theban saga do so unknowingly. One is Queen Agave, daughter of Cadmos.

Euripides' *Bacchae* tells how Agave, frenzied by the god Dionysus, kills her son, King Pentheus, thinking he is a lion's whelp. Dionysus, son of Zeus and Agave's dead sister Semele, had come to Thebes. Pentheus blasphemed and repudiated him. Dionysus then tricked Pentheus into observing his, Dionysus', rites on the mountain where Pentheus then is torn apart.

Semele, the mortal mother of Dionysus, was consumed by Zeus' lightning. Dionysus has his mother's sister Agave kill her mortal son. Unable to revenge the loss of his mother, Dionysus inflicts the slaying of her son on a cognate mother.

The other mother in the Theban saga who kills her son is Aedon, wife of Zethus, son of Antiope, daughter of a brother of a usurper of the house of Thebes. Jealous of the many children of Niobe, her husband's brother's wife, Aedon plans to kill them. She unwittingly kills her own son instead and mourns until turned into a nightingale (Rose 1950:340).

### *Myth and Social Structure*

The myths of mothers slaying their sons have no correspondence with elements of ancient Greek law or social structure. They have been seen as expressing deep male fears. Slater (1968) argues that the women of classic Greece, married young and secluded in their husbands' households, found primary emotional satisfaction in their relationship with their young sons. They also felt and expressed sexual antagonism toward them. The sons grew up to be like their fathers: narcissistic, competitive, contemptuous of women and afraid of them, particularly of mature women. Slater's theories are accepted by Chodorow (1978) in her psychoanalytically oriented feminist analysis of gender roles and their transmission.

There is no simple or self-evident correspondence between the myths of a society and its social structure, as the Greek myths of mothers slaying their sons should make clear. Studies of mythology may illuminate aspects of social structure; and an understanding of social structure and the values a social system embodies may enrich our understanding of its mythology. However, social systems rarely, if ever, embody a consistent set of values. It is to be expected that the multiple messages of myth amplify inconsistencies. To continue the analogy with mathematics, we may expect myths to exhibit more than one logical structure. The same body of myth may also resonate in societies separated by time and space, particularly when the myths represent universal topics charged with emotion such as gender roles and family relations.

The relation between myth and social structure is considered by Carroll in his critique (1978) of Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth. Arguing against Lévi-Strauss's paired categories "the overrating of blood relations" and the "the underrating of blood relations," Carroll suggest as substitutes "the devaluation of patrilineal kin ties" and "the affirmation of patrilineal kin ties." He proposes "that the structure of the Theban saga revolves around the opposition between the devaluation/affirmation of patrilineal kin ties" (ibid.:812). He attributes this opposition to the transformation of Greek society during the time that the Olympian myths took the shape in which we know them (9th to 6th centuries B.C.). Having been a society organized around patrilineal kinship, Greek society became organized into city-states. However, patrilineal kin groups continued to exist and exercise claims over the individual. This "social dilemma," suggests Carroll, is "reflected in the mythology" (ibid.:813).

Carroll's view of Greek kinship is not entirely consistent with that of Finley. Finley (1954:111) indicates that other organizing principles were as important as kinship or more so in Homeric Greece. He discusses guest friendship among equals, noble-retainer relationships among unequals and slavery. However, of all the organizing principles of

Homeric society, Finley gives priority to the *oikos*, the household, which passed from father to son.

Inheritance in the male line and a patrilineal ethos are not equivalent to the existence of patrilineal kin groups. This has been emphasized by Peters (1976) in the distinction he draws between patrilineality and a patrilineal ethos. The distinction is evidence among the Sarakatsani where a patrilineal ethos coexists with a cognatic kinship system and with the family as the largest corporate unit (Campbell 1964). It is by no means established that Homeric Greece had patrilineages. Indeed, Finley implicitly argues against such a possibility (1954:94, 98).

### CONCLUSION

If myths carry multiple messages about the societies that generate the myths, then they also carry messages about the societies in which the myths continue to resonate. If some Greek myths resonate in our society, it is because at least some of their messages are relevant. This paper has focused on messages about women, messages which include male dominance and the deprivations women may incur in seeking roles in the public and political domains. These messages are not limited to Mediterranean societies of the ancient world or today.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to Baldry (1971:110-111), Electra "seems to have been first mentioned in poetry of the seventh century: one poet, Xanthus, gave the reason for her name—she was the daughter who knew no marriage-bed (Greek: *lektron*).” Vernant (1969:142) also states that "Electra can be associated with *alektra*, without wedlock." I emphasize these sources, as well as Lattimore, since one of the readers of the manuscript insists that the proper translation of Electra's name is "amber."

<sup>2</sup> As Baldry notes (1971:110), Electra is not named by Homer, although three daughters of Agamemnon with other names are mentioned in the *Iliad*. I am indebted to another reader for the statement of when Electra became important as a character.

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